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SUBJECT: PRO-CHAVEZ MEDIA ESCALATE RHETORICAL ATTACKS ON
JEWISH COMMUNITY AND CATHOLIC CHURCH LEADERS

REF: CARACAS 002089

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASON 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary. A pro-government daily accused Jewish rabbis and Mossad agents October 29 of conspiring against the Chavez government. These unfounded assertions come on the heels of a government-run television network talk show asserting without proof that Jewish businessmen are funding student demonstrations against Chavez' proposed constitutional reforms. The same pro-government daily also published an October 29 headline accusing Catholic bishops of being "owned" by opposition political parties. While pro-government media attacks on the Jewish community and Catholic bishops are not new, these incendiary attacks appear to be aimed at discrediting criticism of Chavez' constitutional package and intimidating independent religious leaders in the run-up to the early December referendum. End Summary.

Anti-Semitic Attacks

12. (SBU) The daily "Marciano" op-ed in the October 29 edition of the pro-government daily "Vea" accuses Jewish rabbis and Mossad agents of engaging in a conspiracy against President Chavez. (Note: former Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel is widely believed to be the author of the "Marciano" column. End Note.) Specifically, the column claims rabbis "stimulated the aggressive action of fascist groups in the streets" during the October 23 university student march on the National Assembly. The op-ed also asserts without proof that Mossad agents encouraged the students to try to break through police cordons and of seeking "contacts with military officers."

13. (SBU) During the October 26 airing of the stridently pro-Chavez talk show "La Hojilla" on government run VTV, host Mario Silva asserted without evidence that "Jewish businessmen" are financing student demonstrations against Chavez' proposed constitutional reforms. Silva claimed that Jewish community leaders, specifically Rabbi Jacobo Ban Zaken and Rabbi Pinchas Brenner, played a key role in the short-lived April 2002 coup against Chavez and are once again conspiring to "destabilize" Chavez' government.

Discrediting Catholic Bishops

¶4. (SBU) The October 29 edition of "Vea" also took aim at Catholic bishops for their criticism of Chavez' constitutional reform package (Reftel). The paper's headline reads: "Bishops Owned by AD and COPEI." (Note: AD and COPEI are the two opposition parties that dominated Venezuelan politics for 40 years prior to Chavez' election in 1998). Drawing on former VP Jose Vicente Rangel's October 28 TV interview with a pro-Chavez priest from Maracaibo, the article accused the Catholic bishops of protecting the "privileges and interests of the rich" and of "turning their backs on the people." "Vea" front-page attack comes on the heels of President Chavez' and other senior government leaders' rhetorical attacks on the Catholic bishops (Reftel).

Embassy Action

¶5. (C) Embassy meets regularly with religious leaders to discuss issues related to international religious freedom. The Ambassador met October 23 with 17 visiting delegation members of the American Joint Distribution Committee; the group expressed concern about growing, government-fanned anti-Semitism in Venezuela. We are seeking follow-on meetings for the Ambassador with the Confederation of Israelite Associations in Venezuela (CAIV) as well as with Caracas Cardinal Jorge Urosa.

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